

"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

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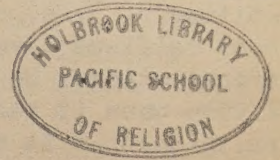
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WARREN HUGH WILSON

1867-1937

Ambassador Extraordinary to the Rural Church

March 1937



An Appreciation by Henry Israel

When Warren Wilson stepped out of the Presbyterian Building in New York City, he emerged as the Prime Minister of the Rural Church of the United States. He was a peer second to none for a generation. The 100,000 little country churches dotted over the countryside of a nation, including pastors and people, were the concern of his great heart. His understanding of the effects of the rigors, as well as the rewards, of nature upon the children of the soil enabled him to serve so effectively among his people and at the gates of Heaven as their intercessor. Among his unique contributions were that:-

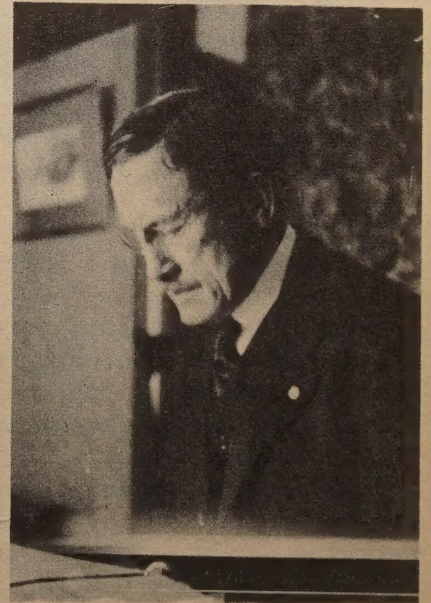
He interpreted our Christian religion to meet the peculiar needs of our agricultural population, and knew how in turn to interpret the religion of the land to the urban constituency of the Church. This he did so ably with voice and pen.

He had a philosophy of rural religion which those who trailed his paths appreciated that he was continually refining and amplifying. It was one that was still unfinished when he left us. It comprehended a concept of life with all its implications from the holy earth, its growing and bearing things, those who were the human household of its husbandry, to a concept of God as Creator and Father of a chosen people who toil with nature to keep His creation fertile and good even as He ordained it "In the beginning."

He implemented the country pastorate for service among parishioners engaged in agricultural pursuits and without the accessories of urban institutions. He trailed and studied the minister's common everyday tasks in order that the pastorate might become more skillful as well as more soulful in service.

He approached his task from the standpoint of a social scientist, which he evidenced in his early career by his book on Quaker Hill and the series of church surveys he made. In fact, he was a pioneer in community engineering for the purpose of giving good religion an opportunity of expression and thereby the better to meet the needs of the growing generation.

His appraisal of rural values, economic, social, personal, established standards that afforded stability and validity to life in its simpler setting for the millions of those who love their land. As their prophet, possessed with unmovable conviction, he was a tower of strength to the rural church.



And what a teacher he was! The rural ministry of a nation sat at his feet. He was a scholar himself. Latterly he became more philosophical, which gave his teaching vivacity and buoyancy, and with his humor thrown in, made people hungry to trail him for further morsels of his stimulating thinking.

He had an international mind and so, also, an interconfessional heart. He was perfectly at home when he could sit at the council table with the other denominational leaders of the Country Church movement. His strategy was that of the unities of life, of the community, and so of her, the Church, which he served with such selfless devotion. He was no champion of any mechanized scheme of church reorganization. He was a believer in the larger parish plan and defended it aggressively when it was damned with faint praises. He had an inherent faith in rural religion that it would work out its own best institutional expression.

He had rare platform ability. He was a virile type of messenger with interpretative as well as prophetic gifts. These, with his rugged and tenacious personality, drove him on his travels to the remotest parts of the country. He was a crusader of the first rank whose faith in the folk of the land and his conviction about their place in our national life was born out of his own deep-rooted kinship with the world of Nature.

An Appreciation by Thomas Jesse Jones

Dr. Warren Wilson personified a deep spiritual appreciation of the soil and rural life. With Liberty Hyde Bailey, the Dean of American Agriculture, he had a sincere devotion to the Holy Earth. Through his brilliant interpretations of rural communities, he was ever seeking to stimulate Christian people to a realization of their responsibilities to the people of the open country. Whether in his office on Fifth Avenue, New York City, in out of the way rural parishes, in the little schools of the southern mountains, or among the Indians of the western prairies, he was the devoted and able apostle of the soil as God's most precious gift to humanity.

Some years ago a lonely farm demonstrator among the Indians of Oklahoma thrilled me by his deep gratitude for the practical wisdom and new vision of rural life received from a New York City visitor whose name he did not know. Eagerly my mind turned in a search for that unique personality among the seven million New Yorkers so completely obsessed by urban interests and so sadly indifferent to the rural foundations of our Nation. The search was easy, for Warren Wilson's advocacy of rural realities was outstanding not only in New York City but also among all Americans.

An Appreciation by Woodward E. Finley

When the Board of National Missions first established the Department of the Country Church and placed Dr. Wilson in charge, it gave to him as his proving ground the Presbytery of French Broad in Western North Carolina. The work in the mountains had been done along sentimental lines. I had joined the Presbytery a few years before and it was my privilege to work with Dr. Wilson these twenty-seven or eight years. It was indeed a proving ground, virgin territory for his ideas and all of it pioneer work. There was one phrase which Dr. Wilson used frequently in those first years, but which he rarely mentioned in the later years and that was: "This is a great adventure." He was trying out his ideas and no explorer in unknown regions and no pioneer met the conditions better than he did. He explored the localities, he studied the needs and met them, always adventuring and overcoming

every obstacle with his dynamic energy and keen intellect that envisioned a battle already won. Dr. Wilson inspired his workers. His camps had great speakers, his programs were so workable, although at times some grumbled and said: "It can't be done, he is attempting the impossible." But he did it and today his adventure is no more on trial but it is a thing accomplished. He had the faculty of making his workers feel that they belonged to a great family of which he was the head. One letter said: "He entered into my smallest work. He scolded when I needed it, he praised unstintedly for work well done." To many his keen wit that stung, his bludgeon blows to opposition led them to think he was an autocrat, but to us who have followed him through these years, he was a loving friend and the lowliest member of the family was known to him by name. Some one wrote me Dr. Wilson loved everybody.

As I said during these late years Dr. Wilson rarely mentioned the word adventure, for instead of a few churches in missionary territory, he had come to be accepted over all the country and beyond. Instead of an adventurer he had become a leader in a world movement. We saw less of him as the work enlarged. He was an intense worker and few appreciated the extent and the exactions of his field. I had heard of a great conference he held and those attending said he was wonderful. I wrote him of it and he answered: "It was difficult. I had a severe headache all the time and, oh, those endless conferences!" Himself he would not save.

Honors have come to him from government and from churches. He was the dean of rural church workers and his leadership had become recognized through out the Christian church, but we of the Presbytery of French Broad feel that we, his first born, have been peculiarly privileged in that we were his first love and enjoyed his leadership, his inspiration as few have.

An Appreciation by John H. Reisner

Warren Wilson's international contributions were not spectacular but they were very real. One thinks first of his students from Canada, Iceland, England, Ireland, Scotland, Czechoslovakia, South Africa, West Africa, Armenia, Japan, China, Siam and Australia, and of the missionaries in his classes from South America, India, China Africa. This group is significant not alone because of its world wide representation, but rather I take it from the fact that they were face to face with one of the greatest, if not the greatest, pioneer of the awakening rural church of the twentieth century, and that they have been channels through which his influence has been carried to the ends of the earth.

One of the enterprises closest to his heart, I am sure, was the International Association of Agricultural Missions and the Christian Rural Fellowship, which succeeded it. He helped to organize the former in 1919, was its chairman for the first ten years, and its secretary for its last five years. He was chairman of the Fellowship from its organization in 1934. The International Association of Agricultural Missions was an attempt to dignify, or at least in the early days, to clothe agricultural missions with a degree of respectability and significance which it didn't have and to secure for it a more adequate backing. Incidentally it was and is one of the organizations in which both home and foreign missions were equally represented in a common purpose. It had a great usefulness in spite of the fact that its available resources were never more than a few hundred dollars at any one time. And its fellowship was memorable. No missionary will ever forget Warren Wilson's generous and loving introductions of them at the fellowship groups. As he dignified the rural religious interests in the homeland, so he did in far away lands. When it came time to reorganize the I.A.A.M., having served its purpose, it was logical that a Christian Rural Fellowship should evolve from it, whose purpose was to promote

understanding and appreciation of the spiritual and religious values that abide in the processes of agriculture and the relationship of rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad.

His third international contribution to rural religion began with his appointment as technical consultant in a comprehensive survey of the Christian Mass Movement under the auspices of the National Christian Council of India. I shall not deal with the findings of that important study. They can be found in the printed volume. Upon his return to the United States, the first letter he wrote was to Mr. J. Z. Hodge, the Scotch Secretary of the National Christian Council. "It has been a great year," he wrote, "and I am glad to have had it. It seems as though I had just begun to live." And to another friend, "The work and the people, the friends I met, and the churches I saw in India are constantly in my mind. I cannot get away from India if I would." India had so captured his heart and imagination, that he wanted to return for more permanent service, and initiated steps to this end. The missionary world is the loser that it didn't use Warren Wilson more. He would have been equally at home in Africa or the Far East as he was in India. He was "at home" in the village in India because, possibly better than any religious leader in America of his time, he was "at home" when he was with those who live on the land and tend to beasts and plants.

This leads to my last observation. Warren Wilson's most lasting contribution to the rural church will be in his religious interpretation of rural processes. "Religion," he says, "is not something apart from the week day toil. It is an experience within that toil." For the farmer, his wife and their children, religious experience can be gained therefore with respect to these experiences that inhere in the seed time and harvest, the care of dumb cattle, the care of the land, in all the divinely appointed recreative processes with which their life is intimately concerned. A knowing friend observes that Dr. Wilson's own religion came to be less Christ-centered, more God-centered. "Like St. Francis of Assissi," writes one of his Southern Mountain pastors, "Dr. Wilson's ministry has reached out, not only to country people, but to the country itself. He preached to the soil, to the trees, and to all growing things on which people depend, and which make life more beautiful." "The minister does not need to be a farmer, unless he wants to," says Dr. Wilson in one of his books, "but he is required to interest himself in the consecration of the soil, and of the beasts, and of the domesticated plants to the Lord; for without them no church can exist. The cows and hogs may not be communicant members, but they are contributing creatures. Their welfare is to be studied, their ways of behavior known. In the end they too will tell him something about the Creator." His last printed paper was under the title, "The Faith Man Shares with Beast and Tree." Like the writer of Deuteronomy, he felt, understood, knew beyond peradventure of doubt, that this land "is a land which the Lord thy God careth for; the eyes of the Lord are upon it from the beginning of the year even unto the end of the year." "The Earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof," proclaimed the Psalmist, and Warren Wilson entered as few have into the fullness of the Heritage of God in all his ways. In this is Warren Wilson's greatest heritage to us.

An Appreciation by Malcolm Dana

The loss of Warren Wilson is national in scope! It is personal with myself, for I have lost a real friend. It is personal with all of us who have known him, worked with him, and loved him and what he has stood for so staunchly throughout the years. We will strive to do what we are certain that he would have us do: we will "carry on" to the end that he being dead may go on speaking through the years to come.